



Project Abstract

Global Price and Income History 1200-1950 – Stage 1

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How well or badly did people live around the world in centuries past? When did the North Atlantic countries pull ahead of other countries, or were they always ahead? What were the underlying causes -- agricultural changes, industrial changes, wars, diseases, population pressures, or commercial dominance? How can scholars find out more about these perennial concerns?

Such fundamental questions call for fresh thinking, fresh archival research, and a new technology for diffusing the quantitative historical record of what happened to people's income levels and the prices they paid. The project offers all of these.

In addition to pushing the data frontier back several centuries for several countries, the project is designed to tackle the even tougher task of comparing prices, incomes, and productivity across places and regions for each early date. The team has begun to make headway on the key task of converting all measures into modern metric units with partial adjustments for quality differences. Our early findings confirm some long-believed patterns, and reveal some new ones. Northwestern Europe was a zone of peculiar grain scarcity, relative to non-food goods, suggesting that its advantages in agricultural productivity were exceeded by its advantages in other sectors, particularly capital goods and knowledge goods.

To supplement the earlier abstract, this one features four breakthroughs we have made since our Stage 1 started in January.

(1) Conversion of the world's pre-metric measurements into metric. Past scholars have been frustrated by the inability to compare across regions in centuries past, owing to the eclectic mix of local units of measurement in a very divided world. Our team has already harvested many of the fruits of the field of metrology around the world. We can now compare, for example, the prices of labor or grain or nails or writing paper in southern Korea, Istanbul, Amsterdam, Moscow, Peru and many other places in the eighteenth century.

(2) New findings on real incomes in East Asia. Starting around January, a five-member team from within our group has produced a stirring new paper on real wages in China and Japan since the eighteenth century ("Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in China, Japan, and Europe, 1738-1925" by Robert C. Allen, Jean-Pascal Bassino, Debin Ma, Christine Moll-Murata, and Jan Luiten van Zanden). The results tentatively depart from Kenneth Pomeranz's (2000) pioneering



work on the great divergence between Europe and China. The five-author team will also produce other papers extending this Eurasian comparison to include Korea, Java, and India.

(3) New archival discoveries in Beijing. This spring and summer, team member Debin Ma, helped by a Beijing scholar (Mr. Yuan Weipeng), has discovered large sets of private merchant books covering the period c1800-c1850. These give prices of many things in copper, with copper-silver conversion rates. The merchant books can even be used to figure out the implicit interest rates around Beijing in that period. Other team members are launching similar explorations in the archives in Latin America, Istanbul, Spain, Korea, Vietnam, and the Dutch East Indies company.

(4) Data supplying web site. As promised, a centerpiece of Stage 1 and later stages will be the development of a vast supply of historical data downloadable as Excel files. There will be hundreds of such files, once we have carefully edited them and made the necessary conversions of ancient units to metric. We have just begun. Please visit the web site, remembering that it is still in progress and that most data files are not fully edited yet, and thus not clickable. We will also unveil the site soon on such wide-reaching sites as eh.net.

Our new research group is the Global Price and Income History Group (GPIH Group). Its current members are:

Robert Allen (Oxford, UK),
Jean-Pascal Bassino (Japan),
Gregory Clark (California – Davis),
Metin Cosgel (U. of Connecticut),
Martin Cuesta (UADE, Argentina),

John Devereux (CUNY - Queens),
Philip Hoffman (Caltech),
David Jacks (Simon Fraser),
Seong Ho Jun (Sung Kyun Kwan
University, Korea),
James B. Lewis (Oxford),

Peter Lindert (California - Davis),
Debin Ma (GRIPS, Japan),
Paolo Malanima (Napoli),
Christina Moll-Murata (Utrecht),
Boris Mironov (European University St.
Petersburg),

Sevket Pamuk (Bosporus University),
Bas van Leeuwen (Utrecht),
Jan Luiten van Zanden (Utrecht and IISG,
Netherlands),
Marianne Ward (Loyola College, Maryland)

Project Website

<http://gpih.ucdavis.edu>